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ABSTRACT

This document presents findings of a study that explored the issues for Scottish parents, pupils, and headteachers when raising grievances and seeking redress to those grievances. Focus-group interviews were conducted with 31 parents, 6 headteachers, and 8 students during December 1993-February 1994. Findings indicate that parents had a wide range of grievances, but discipline and supervision-related issues were relatively common. Headteachers reported that the frequency of grievance-raising was fairly high, and two-thirds of the parents had previously contacted the school with a grievance. However, many parents said they were generally satisfied with their schools and the schools' responses to their concerns. Schools that were more effective in resolving grievances encouraged good parent-teacher relationships and provided community access. Findings suggest that when a grievance is raised, feedback on progress and the action taken to resolve the grievance should be given to parents. Formal channels for grievance and redress may prove ineffective because many parents think of themselves as expressing concerns, rather than "making a complaint." It is recommended that schools initiate teacher training to develop links with families, parent education, and home-school partnerships. (LMI)

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Partners or Pests?

Experiences of Grievance and
Redress Procedures in Education

Carole Moore

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Redress Procedures in Education

Carole Moore



The Scottish Council for
Research in Education

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Summary

This research forms part of a wider study which aims to investigate issues arising from the use of grievance and redress procedures in education. One phase of the study is a survey of all Scottish education authorities about current mechanisms relating to grievance procedures, and the guidance offered to schools. The second phase, the focus of this report, sets out to explore the issues for parents, pupils and headteachers when raising grievances and seeking redress to those grievances.

This research

This part of the project took place between December 1993 - February 1994. It consisted of focus discussion groups held with parents (6 groups) and headteachers (1 group). Pupils' views were also obtained (1 group). Various methods were used to obtain the sample. Three groups were arranged for us—the headteachers, pupils and ethnic minority group. The researchers organised the remainder ie all but one of the parent groups. 'Snowball' techniques, based on personal contacts, and market research methods were used here. This enabled a wide variety of parents to be included. In total, 31 parents, 6 headteachers and 8 pupils were included. It will be clear that this is a preliminary study, designed to raise issues and questions rather than to provide categorical answers. The sampling technique and size enabled a wide range of issues to be raised. However the findings are not generalisable.

The findings

The range of grievances

The range of grievances which parents have is wide, but examples given indicate that discipline and supervision-related issues were relatively common. Particular issues relating to classroom organisation were raised in several groups, especially the assessment of pupils at primary level and subsequent seating arrangements based on this assessment. The lack of provision of religious education, other than Christianity, was also raised in two groups.

Frequency of grievance-raising

According to headteachers, the frequency of grievance-raising was also fairly high and indeed two thirds (21) of the parents had previously contacted their school with a grievance. However, many parents said that they were generally satisfied with educational provision, and that when they did contact the school the outcome was acceptable. Many parent discussants did not feel that they had 'complained' as such, but usually the nature of their concerns was similar to those who felt they had a grievance.

Current procedures for raising and redressing grievances

Current procedures relating to grievance and redress appear to vary between the primary and secondary sector. At primary level, it was found that the headteacher, or class teacher, were usually approached by parents seeking redress. At secondary level, parents and pupils were usually referred to guidance staff in the first instance.

Factors influencing the effectiveness of procedures

Parents' comments indicate that formal channels do exist. However, numerous factors appear to influence their effectiveness. Headteachers noted that some parents tend to ignore existing mechanisms, preferring a more immediate and direct approach (ie turning up at the school without warning). Other parents chose not to raise a grievance, for example, because of the perceived effect on their child, or because they did not think the school could do anything to rectify the matter. These factors may diminish the usefulness of formal channels.

Parents usually contact the school to raise a grievance by phoning or writing, often to make an appointment. Schools use a variety of methods to contact parents. In the study, evidence suggested that letters home with the pupil were commonly used to convey information, and telephone calls and visits were used in specific situations, such as when discipline was involved. Several parents felt that letters home with the pupil should not be used for cases involving discipline.

Problems relating to grievance handling were also noted. One grievance raised by some parents relates to the speed with which staff informed them about incidents or concerns regarding their child—in some cases an unnecessary delay was felt to occur. Perceived differences in professional status between the parent and teacher also appear to affect parental satisfaction in some cases.

It was thought that primary schools may have more experience dealing with grievances, and this, combined with the smaller, more intimate environment of many primary schools, appeared to contribute to greater satisfaction with grievance handling.

It was felt by some that an independent advocate, or parent-teacher liaison officer, might help parents to raise a grievance and obtain redress. More generally, it was felt that the person responsible for handling grievances should adopt an attitude of objectivity, empathy and support. Other discussants, however, felt that existing mechanisms were adequate. Headteachers believed that supply teachers were required to allow the regular classteacher more time to meet with parents.

The findings suggest that when a grievance is raised, feedback on progress and the action taken to resolve the grievance should be given. Where no progress or action is apparent, parents may take matters into their own hands, or feel frustrated that 'nothing is being done'. The fear of a situation worsening if a grievance was raised was also a concern to parents and pupils. Such factors would appear to affect motivation for raising future grievances.

Improving knowledge and understanding

Formal channels for grievance and redress in education may prove ineffective if parents do not perceive that they are 'making a complaint'. Teacher training could further emphasise the need to develop and maintain links with individual families, to increase personal knowledge of parents and children. Parents also need better knowledge about schools and their ways of working. Current initiatives promoting home-school partnerships should help and we see these as a way forward in decreasing the level of grievances caused by misunderstandings of school systems and procedures.

1 Background to the study

Many public sector service providers in Britain have now established procedures by which the customers of those services are able both to express any grievances they have about the way in which the services operate and to expect a resolution to that grievance (*NCC Journal*, October 1993). However, a recent report by the National Consumer Council suggests that few schools advertise their grievance and redress procedures or encourage parents to use them. That is, even if mechanisms do exist, this does not guarantee that they are effective from the consumers' viewpoint (NCC, 1993). Hannon (1983), in a similar vein, concludes:

...that the accountability debate in education has omitted an important dimension, namely the availability of formal avenues of redress for aggrieved individuals and groups (p.225)

It should, however, be recognised that offering formal avenues of redress in education is no simple matter, as can be seen later in this report. Hannon's article deals primarily with intermediate levels of dispute resolution in education (in this case: the Commission for Local Administration, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Equal Opportunities Commission) but observes, in relation to schools, that there is:

...a need for more debate and research on, for example, efforts to promote more democratic structures and new consultation and grievance procedures for schools. (p.224)

■ Research strategy

This research aims to go some way towards investigating this apparent gap in knowledge by conducting a small-scale exploratory study. The study occurred in two phases. Firstly, a postal questionnaire was sent to all twelve Scottish regions asking for details of any procedures or policies which they had established dealing with grievances in education. Secondly, six discussion groups were held with parents about any experiences they might have had regarding how their grievance was handled by the education department or school.

If parents had no personal experiences, then their views were sought on how they would like to see any structures dealing with grievances and redress to be dealt with. One pupil group was also conducted to ascertain their experiences. In addition, a headteachers' discussion group was conducted to identify issues which exist at school level.

This report is based on the second stage of the research that involved the discussion groups. As it is to be incorporated into a final report to be published by the Scottish Consumer Council which will include the results of both parts of the study, this chapter will not provide a review of the literature, contextual information, or details of the regional survey.

As there have been few studies on educational grievance structures in Britain to date, the study therefore aims to raise awareness of procedures and issues which exist for parents, teachers and pupils when an aspect of education gives rise to a grievance. Thus, the nature of how, and what, grievances are raised at school level were explored. Further, with regard to any policy implications, the research aimed to identify ways in which parents and pupils would prefer to approach educational professionals, when or if, they choose to raise a grievance. Any factors preventing effectiveness of procedures were also investigated.

Issues relating to any barriers which may exist to prevent such action by parents and pupils were investigated in the discussion groups. Many parents, of course, do not complain about schools because they have no need to. A substantial body of research exists which indicates parental trust in the professional expertise of teachers. Group discussions, therefore also probed reasons for *not* raising a grievance.

Whilst it is intended that the study should help inform any future developments in the field of accountability structures in education, in the area of grievance and redress mechanisms, it is not within the remit of this study to indicate how developments should proceed. Perhaps predictably, given the exploratory nature of this report, the findings reveal further avenues of investigation and highlight the complexities of implementing formal systems of dealing with grievances and their redress.

At the risk of echoing Hannon, this study would suggest a need for further in-depth research on how adequately to devise and establish effective policies which, at the very least, consider the various personal interrelationships between the different groups involved.

■ Definitions

The researchers acknowledge that parents are not the only group who raise grievances regarding direct educational provision, but as anticipated (and subsequently confirmed by the headteacher group) the overwhelming majority of grievances *do* appear to be raised by parents, about some aspect of their child's education or care. It was felt, therefore, that a parental perspective should predominate in a study of this type. A similar case can be made for organising a discussion group of headteachers, rather than local authority or government officials, as most grievances under examination here appear to be made to the school.

Obviously, if parents want to clarify a matter of school policy, the exact nature of the contact with the school to obtain a response will differ substantially from that where a serious allegation is being made against staff members. Yet, the means of initial contact with the school is likely to be the same. The range of parental contact with the school is investigated in this study, with the focus emphasising how grievances are dealt with. Whilst the central theme of this study is grievances, most parents in the group were happy with the education their children received. The nature of grievances makes it difficult to reflect on the many positive aspects of schools, and this should be borne in mind.

As parental contact with the school increases, the nature of parent - teacher relationships appear to change. Therefore, the level of involvement is investigated.

This is done by looking at the differences between 'active' and 'non-active' parents (see Annex 1). 'Active' would imply that parents are involved in some form of regular, formal contact with the school (not including parents' evenings), eg being a member of the PTA or school board, or helping in the classroom on a regular basis.

It is recognised that many people do not like to consider themselves 'complainers', and therefore, for the purposes of this study, the range of issues causing concern to parents are referred to as grievances. This term is considered more neutral than 'complaints', whilst indicating that the nature of issues noted were usually more than simply queries, and on most occasions parents or pupils sought some measure of redress.

2 Research design and methods

■ Method adopted

The remit of this phase of the study was to arrange discussion groups to determine issues arising when parents and pupils wish to raise grievances of an educational nature. It was decided, therefore, to arrange groups consisting of people who might have different perspectives of grievance and redress. Headteachers, parents and pupils were consulted. Most grievances seem to be raised by parents, and to reflect this, the total number of parents included (31) is greater than that of pupils (8) or headteachers (6). The composition of the eight groups is shown below in Table 1, and key characteristics of parental group members are included in Annex 1.

Table 1: Composition of Discussion Groups

Group	Numbers Attending	Source of Group	Location
1 Headteachers	6	Association of Headteachers in Scotland	Various Regions
2 Ethnic minority parents	5	Ethnic Minority Youth Project	Tayside
3 Parents from rural areas	2	Market/Publicity	Tayside
4 Parents from urban areas	7	Market/Publicity / Scottish School Board	Strathclyde
5 Parents from an area of priority treatment	5	Personal / 'Snowball'	Strathclyde
6 Parents from an urban area	7	Personal / 'Snowball'	Lothian
7 Parents from prosperous areas	5	Personal / 'Snowball'	Lothian
8 5th and 6th year pupils	8	One Secondary School	Lothian

■ Obtaining the sample

The sample was organised in two main ways. Three groups were organised for us by intermediaries, and the other groups were organised by the researchers.

Groups arranged by intermediaries

As can be seen from Table 1, the six headteachers who took part were selected by the Association of Headteachers in Scotland. AHTS mainly represents primary school headteachers and the participants in this group were all heads of Scottish primary schools. It is therefore worth emphasising the absence of a secondary headteacher perspective from the study.

The Ethnic Minority Youth Project in Tayside agreed to let us attend a meeting of an established group of ethnic minority parents who met regularly.

The group leader was present at this meeting to help overcome any language barriers. One final group was arranged for us, the pupils' group. Here, after arranging access to the school through the headteacher, a group of eight pupils from 5th and 6th year were organised to take part.

Groups arranged by researchers

The main ways of identifying parents willing to participate in these discussion groups consisted of the following

- leafleting potential parents (Gp. 3 & 4)
- approaching potential parents and asking them questions to determine suitability, eg if they have children in school or not/ willingness to participate (Gp. 3)
- obtaining the help of professionals to recruit parents, eg Scottish School Board Association, community groups (Gp. 2, 4)
- personal contacts and 'snowball' techniques (Gp. 6-8).

It was initially intended that we would contact parents for the other groups (ie groups 3-7) via School Board parent representatives or Parent-Teacher Association/ Parent Association representatives from a variety of schools. However, given the timescale for the project, this method proved particularly complex and unwieldy. Not only did the agreement of SB or PTA members need to be secured, but permission and co-operation was also required of the Region as well as from the headteachers from each school with a PTA/SB contact. Consequently, alternative methods were employed.

The main approach to selecting parents for groups 3 and 4 finally resembled a hybrid of market research and publicity-campaigning methods. Whilst this resulted in a more direct contact with parents, there was less overall control over the numbers and type of parents attending. Thus, these groups consisted both of parents who had numerous grievances, and those who felt generally satisfied with their child's education. They also contained parents who were 'active' in school participation and those who had little involvement. Most parents in the sample fell into the latter category (see Annex 1).

Greater control over the composition of groups 5 - 7 was obtained using a 'snowball' technique. Essentially, this involved identifying a personal contact known to one of the researchers. This person then arranged a group of parents from the locality to attend the group.

■ Data analysis

Detailed notes were made during the discussion groups which were then written up to provide summary sheets of each group. Back-up tape-recordings were also made of each group to inform analysis. The summary sheets were organised into categories to reflect the initial research questions. The summary sheets were then analysed for any main themes emerging, as well as for any specific issues which respondents raised.

The discussion schedule for headteachers provided a pilot for the remaining discussion groups (see Annex 2), and this is reflected in the semi-structured nature of the schedule for the headteachers. From the findings of this group, a

more structured schedule was devised for the parents' groups which allowed common themes to emerge across all groups.

In writing up the data, it should be noted that words usually associated with quantifiable amounts, eg 'often', 'some', 'a few' are used. These statements indicate the overall impression gained from the discussions. This can be viewed as a drawback of any discussion group method. Analysis of group material makes it difficult to assess the actual level to which any statements made are the views of all group members. However, as the research is primarily to raise issues and not to be representative, this is not seen as a particular weakness of the study.

■ Confidentiality

All information gathered was treated as confidential to the project. No individual has been identified in any part of this report or at any time during the research.

3 Views of headteachers and pupils

This chapter reports the findings of two discussion groups, one consisting of six primary headteachers, the other of eight pupils. The former group was selected by the Association of Headteachers in Scotland whilst the latter was organised by senior staff in a secondary school. Firstly, headteacher perceptions of why parents have grievances, and the nature of these, are reported. In addition, the following issues are covered: how often grievances are brought to the attention of the headteacher; how schools, and particularly headteachers, deal with grievances; and perceptions of how local authority education departments handle grievances. Thereafter, pupils' views will be reported.

HEADTEACHERS' VIEWS

As there seems to be a lack of regional guidance to schools on procedures for grievance and redress (see local authority phase of this study), schools appear either to adopt their own formal procedures or operate in a more informal way. The unique nature of many grievances makes a standard redress package impractical. This complicates any explanation of current channels in grievance procedures as each school and each region could well adopt different approaches. As one headteacher mused:

"You must be getting the feeling listening to us, you see, that the whole thing is extraordinarily convoluted and complicated, and that, I think, is the reality of it."

■ The range and types of grievance

When asked how parents raise grievances, the headteachers believed that the overwhelming majority approach school staff, at least in the first instance. The headteachers also noted that many grievances were school-based, that is, the source of parent dissatisfaction often arose through an incident in the classroom or on school grounds. Such incidents could be caused by a teacher, pupil or even another parent.

However, headteachers felt that concerns or queries from parents to school staff covered the whole spectrum of educational provision. Sometimes these concerns were felt to be the result of pupils' limited ability to convey an accurate picture of an incident. In other cases, it was considered that parental expectations of how teaching staff or school management should deal with pupils were unrealistic.

Issues thought to be potentially likely to cause a person to raise a grievance included the following:

- *Media-led issues.* For example, one headteacher thought that 'bullying' had replaced 'fighting' as a parental explanation for violent pupil behaviour due to the current high media profile of bullying.

- *Attitude of teachers and headteachers.* According to the group, a high number of complaints would fall into this category. Issues here often related to how grievances were dealt with. For example:

"...the parent is not aware of what you are doing and... the child then goes home and says 'these teachers did nothing about it', not realising that it may be to do with other children in other classes and you have taken appropriate steps, particularly if it is a matter of keeping children safe on the way in or out of school, and the matter has been handled quietly and discreetly... and it is only when it is becoming very obvious that it is being persistently repeated then you will start to involve the parents of the other children. At the most you would say 'would you come in and see me, we have a problem here' and that can open the floodgates to other things eg 'you never do anything when we tell you about it', on the other hand they may be quite receptive and when you explain the steps they will say 'that's fine'...but it's totally impossible to reply in person to every parent who comes, merely with a query, they have to be able to say 'yes, we will believe that you will do whatever is reasonable in this case', but sometimes that doesn't happen."

- *Problems relating to the overall welfare of the family.* Some headteachers in the group considered that some grievances were not necessarily educationally related, but had been brought to the school's attention because the parent did not know who else to approach who could adequately deal with their situation (see section on 'the welfare work of the headteacher').
- *Perceived lack of equity in dealing with pupils who transgress school rules.* Parents, as well as pupils, were considered to have a keen sense of injustice if it was believed that their child had been punished for something in which other children had also been involved yet had not received equal disciplinary measures. Parents sometimes wanted a visible 'punishment' for others they considered to have 'offended':

"Parents want you to parade the punishment... I often find parents are not happy because they want this summary justice in front of everybody and can go away unhappy just not accepting that you won't do it... but they would be the first to complain if you then rowed their child in front of others."

- *Different values between school staff and parents.* According to the headteachers, when a pupil receives disciplinary action from the school for behaviour which is considered acceptable by parents, grievances are likely. For example, the parent may encourage the child to 'hit back' whereas the school would not consider this to be suitable behaviour. Some parents took offence at their children receiving discipline or punishments, and one headteacher accommodated this by setting 'homework exercises' rather than 'punishment exercises'.

While the range of grievances a school may receive is wide, one main area in which headteachers thought complaints were generally absent was the curriculum (eg reading material, standards of teaching, topics studied), although it was felt that grievances of this type could increase in the future given the current educational reforms which were perceived to place increasing stress on teaching ability.

Examples of common grievances provided by one headteacher included the following:

School-based

- school policies (topics not specified)
- school standards eg on homework, outings etc.
- pupils/parent relationships with staff
- concern about cleanliness and repair
- dissatisfaction about communication and access
- dissatisfaction with discipline procedures
- religious/cultural issues in the school
- support services eg school nurse, speech therapist etc.
- playground/lunch time supervision
- school meals - dietary concerns
- problems of parking and traffic outside school gates
- differing viewpoints of PTA members and School Board members

Regional issues

- regional policies, eg pre-five admissions, special educational provision
- national testing
- school cleanliness and safety
- condition of school buildings and play areas
- supervision on school buses

■ **Frequency of grievance handling**

It quickly became clear during the discussion that dealing with grievances from parents was an integral part of these headteachers' work load, and a time-consuming task. This was apparent even where headteachers had delegated responsibility for complaints to another school manager. Reasons for this are not clear at this stage. It could be related to the high profile which headteachers have within a school. Both parents and the local authority appear to place demands on headteachers to deal with any grievances which are brought to them.

The headteachers thought it should be emphasised that the majority of parents do not raise any grievances. One head felt this was indicative of a satisfied parental body. When probed for reasons why he thought this, he stated that the majority of parents turn up at school events relating specifically to their children (eg parent evenings) and at these events parents are encouraged to contact the school if they have any concerns. Yet, as is mentioned in the following chapter, raising grievances at parents' evenings is not easy, and a number of parents do not attend such events. It was commonly felt that many parents relied upon and trusted teacher professionalism to 'get on with the job'.

Whilst the majority (estimated at between 75-90% of parents) complain very infrequently, if at all, a minority of parents were perceived to be 'assertive complainers'. Many of these parents are well known to the school, not least because of the number of times they have attended the school to raise a grievance. The headteachers felt that the characteristics of these 'assertive complainers'

tended to be such that formal procedures are ignored. This was often believed to be due to the emotive nature of either the grievance, and/or the person raising it.

■ How schools handle grievances

As grievance-handling appears to be an integral part of school life, headteachers quickly become accustomed to dealing with them. Formal procedures, whilst they may exist at local authority level as well as at school level, often tend to be ineffective. One explanation given for this is that the 'assertive complainers' tend to choose their own way of raising grievances. As one head stated: 'even if you had a big sign up saying 'complain this way' they would still ignore it and come straight to me'. One reason for this might be that formal channels are viewed as a means of deflecting parental grievances and therefore are not to be trusted. Parental dissatisfaction was noted, when, for example, there was a delay in the processing of their grievance. Another reason given for the inadequacy of formal procedures is that they tend towards a standard approach which is impractical given the range, nature and perceptions of grievances.

Perhaps because of the individualistic nature of grievances, the main approaches therefore adopted by headteachers tended to be more informal. This does not mean that formal methods are not in place. Often reference is made to formal channels when information is given to parents: the school handbook, for example, may suggest that parents telephone the school to make an appointment or to approach the head of department if they have a grievance. Indeed, the school has a responsibility under legislation to publish in its handbook to parents, ways in which redress can be obtained (NCC, 1993). One headteacher explains her way of ensuring parental satisfaction:

"We try to build up relationships with our parents, particularly when children first start school so that they can see that the school is a fairly open place: that they can come in; they have access; there are parent rooms; there are regular meetings with teachers whereby they can discuss matters."

■ The 'welfare work' of the headteacher

The headteachers suggested that some grievances are complex and require careful discussion with parents to ascertain the exact nature of the dissatisfaction. One stated that, ideally, he liked to let the parent talk for the first fifteen minutes to allow them to 'let off steam' or simply to reveal the true nature of the problem (although this was felt to be increasingly difficult as time available for this purpose is becoming less easy to find). Often, any grievances can be resolved simply by 'talking them through'. Sometimes, this includes the school indicating the action it will take to resolve the matter. However, in some cases, educational issues may only play a small part in the approach by parents.

Another head regarded the school as 'one of the few remaining bastions against evil', giving the demise of the ability of the Church to cope with personal difficulties and influence behaviour of community members, as an example. Similarly, the social services were felt less likely to be able to deal with grievances of clients in the current climate due to the increasing demands on their time, and because of the lack of continuous long-term contact with families. Another

headteacher indicated that this problem increased in areas of high deprivation, such as she worked in. The following example illustrates this aspect of headteachers' work:

Headteacher 1: "Hopefully you can guide them in the right direction, because very often I feel as if I am a social worker, a marriage guidance counsellor, I am parenting... helping the people to parent... it goes on and on."

Headteacher 2: "These often come to light as a result of something that has happened in school, and then it snowballs. One small incident will open up a whole can of worms."

■ Local authority involvement in complaints handling

A small, but increasing, minority of parents (less than one per cent, suggested one headteacher) chose to bypass the school when seeking redress of a grievance, and approach their local authority, usually the education department.

There was a common feeling amongst the headteachers that the level of information given to the school about such cases was unsatisfactory. Headteachers reported that they could give considerable effort to obtaining details of a particular incident, yet were frequently not informed of the nature of the initial parental approach, nor the outcome of the case. One headteacher commented on the demoralising effect of such actions by local authorities. There was a strong feeling that local authorities were more likely to be sympathetic to the parental version of events than to the school's. One headteacher mentioned the usefulness of the School Board as a way of obtaining parental support to put across the school's viewpoint more forcefully to the local authority.

■ How grievances might be handled

The following comments were raised about the implications of current procedures for any future developments in grievance and redress debates:

- Whilst many parents were felt to be satisfied with present arrangements for raising grievances, the minority who bring grievances inappropriately give cause for concern. Such parents may want to see a teacher immediately, who could well be teaching a class. If parents appear at a classroom unannounced this can create all sorts of problems, not least the question of the safety of the teacher faced with an emotional parent. Extra teaching staff, to allow the release of teachers to deal with grievances, was thought to be the key resource required for achieving effective procedures.
- Headteachers in the group preferred to deal with grievances the day they were raised, and reported that other organisations, such as the social services and the education department, were difficult to get in touch with immediately. This was believed to delay the ability of schools to respond to grievances.
- The Scottish School Board Association have recently issued a circular saying that School Boards should not deal with matters of a personal nature. This received support from the headteachers who felt that these cases should remain confidential. One suitable role for School Boards was given:

"Where the complaint concerns a school rule, the School Board may then take up that rule, discuss the rule in general and might arrive at a conclusion."

- The many innovations which schools are presently expected to manage puts stress on teachers. It can, for instance, be a lengthy process reaching agreement with parents on any innovations regarding parental partnership. There is a lack of awareness externally about the amount of time involved in dealing with parents. HMI's and education authorities only get a 'snapshot' view of the operation of the school and the true complexities of school life were not understood.
- There are insufficient resources (eg time, staff, knowledge) to establish new systems in education. For example, performance indicator documents were felt to contain some useful facts, but were accompanied by too much information making dissemination of key aspects difficult. It was anticipated that parental contact time would suffer if the changes mean there is less time for staff to devote to individual family concerns. Yet, paradoxically, parents could come to have greater expectations from the system. The Parents' Charter was considered to have been partly instrumental in raising expectations.
- Devolved management moves school organisation into new areas in which staff are unlikely to have prior knowledge, such as accountancy. Maintenance at school level (small repairs are the responsibility of the school under devolved management of schools) will need to be checked to ensure that work standards comply with legislation. At present, guidelines indicate this will be the role of the headteacher but the task facing headteachers in ensuring quality in areas in which they have no prior experience will not be easy. Indeed, the discussion group anticipated that grievances would increase in these areas in the future.

■ Discussion

Grievance and redress handling in education appears to be a fairly common aspect of headteacher work. Some grievances can be of a complex nature or require complex redress measures and therefore individual responses are required from the school. Every aspect of educational provision can be queried, although many grievances derive from incidents on or near school grounds or premises.

Whilst the majority of parents do not raise grievances, a small minority do so regularly. These parents tend not to use formal channels to air their grievance. Grievances are made across a wide range of areas, many arising from classroom incidents. There appear to be many demands placed on a headteacher which make coping with parental grievances difficult, these factors include: parental and government expectations, the nature of the grievance and structural constraints, eg lack of finances, condition of buildings, traffic.

PUPILS' VIEWS

The rest of this chapter reports views of one small group of senior pupils from one secondary school. Pupils have been included in the study to provide a limited, but often neglected perspective (Hodgkin, 1993).

■ Type of grievance

On the whole, opportunities for pupils to raise grievances were considered adequate, and it was thought that generally, the school would try and help them redress their grievance. Generally, issues raised in this group revolved around

learning and the curriculum. For example, work done in Primary 7 had been repeated during the first year of secondary school. The issue of guidance classes was raised, and some pupils felt that the 'Life and Work' part of the course was unnecessary. Several pupils mentioned that lenient discipline methods affected their ability to study in class.

Problems relating to the day-to-day running of the school were also raised. In particular pupils were unhappy about the difficulty in gaining access to the library near exam time, and about a lack of supervision in the canteen which led to disorder. The amount of homework given out at exam times was also a source of dissatisfaction.

In contrast to the parents' discussion groups, pupils at this school did not feel that there was a problem with bullying, although this could be due to the age of the pupils - evidence suggests that younger pupils are more likely to be subjected to risk from bullying (Olweus, 1993), or are more likely to admit to being bullied (Mellor, 1989). Moreover, a group discussion is not a good forum for self-reporting bullying issues. However, as a bullying policy had been established in the school and recently successfully evaluated by pupils, it is possible that this could be one reason for the perceived lack of bullying.

■ Preferred routes for raising grievances

Most of the pupils, if they were unhappy, would prefer to make their complaint to the depute headteacher. The DHT was considered as 'visible' around the school, was seen to be objective and to take pupil concerns seriously. The DHT also provided scheduled times when pupils could approach him. In some cases guidance staff would be approached during, as well as outwith, scheduled guidance classes. In other circumstances, pupils would prefer to speak to their parents rather than approach the school. Only very rarely would a grievance be raised with the classteacher.

One further avenue of grievance was via other pupils. For example, the head girl mentioned that she was approached with grievances from other pupils, and she then passed them on to the headteacher. Prefects were used to patrol certain areas, such as corridors. Some group members felt that pupils as supervisors adversely affected their relationships with other pupils. On the other hand, parents reported that one way of resolving a particular grievance, especially in the bullying and discipline areas, was through the use of pupil supervisors. This may well be an approach deserving further exploration and research.

Sometimes pupils gained strength through numbers. It is noted elsewhere in this report that pupils were often the least likely group to be taken seriously when raising an issue, and, therefore, there was ~~more~~ chance that pupils would be listened to if they argued en masse. This tended to apply to policy matters affecting all the students, and not to sensitive individual concerns. Examples of petitions and campaigns were given. The pupils were also likely to involve their parents as a way of giving greater force to their views.

■ Barriers to raising grievances

Pupils in the group said they would be unlikely to raise a grievance if they thought the situation would not alter. Pupils were also concerned that a situation

might worsen if they reported a grievance to the school. The pupils did not tend to mind their parents writing to the school, although there were some concerns about being identified by name. Some pupils felt that some schools viewed 'complainers' negatively, but said that their school was generally quite receptive to grievances.

■ Discussion

Pupils reported that they tended to feel some dissatisfaction in areas relating to the use of their time at school. When problems occurred, the pupils in the group preferred to approach the deputy head, the guidance teacher or their parents. It was important to pupils that their views were taken seriously, and that something would be done about the problems which they brought to the school's attention.

A belief that nothing would be done was the main criterion which would prevent a pupil from raising a grievance. To add more weight to their argument, they may recruit peer support. It was reported that fear of reprisals might prevent pupils raising a grievance. Parental support was sought when it was thought that this might result in quicker action, or in particularly serious cases. Pupils felt that the school was receptive to their concerns, and were satisfied that the school would help them redress any grievances they might have.

4 Parents' views

This chapter summarises the findings from seven discussion groups in three Scottish Regions, involving a total of 31 parents. The methods used in obtaining the sample are given in Chapter 2. The main areas explored here include: the range of grievances parents may have about the education of their child(ren); how grievances are made; any factors which may prevent people raising a grievance; and perceptions of ways in which grievance and redress handling could be improved.

The study reveals that a 'complaint' cannot be easily defined. Two thirds (21) of the parents included had approached their school with a query or concern about their child's education, even if they did not consider it to be a grievance as such. Indeed, many 'concerns' had the same characteristics as 'complaints', it was simply the perception of the respondent which determined whether they felt they had 'made a complaint' or 'raised a concern'.

■ Causes of dissatisfaction for parents

A number of similar themes emerged across the groups. These are summarised below.

- Overwhelmingly, parents referred to their concern about discipline in schools. Bullying, for example, was mentioned in all the groups. Many grievances were aired about ways schools dealt with the control of children and the subsequent reporting of incidents to parents. This meant that in some cases the grievance being dealt with was not initiated by the parent but by a teacher. Worry was expressed about the length of time schools could take to inform parents that there was a problem with their child (Gp. 4-7).
- Even where schools did contact parents quickly, some parents felt that one approach teachers sometimes adopted was to delegate responsibility to them. One parent felt some staff tended to use what he called:

'the usual 'Mexican stand-off', you know, where they say 'what would you like us to do?' (Gp. 4)

Other parents felt the same way (Gp. 4-6). This was perceived not as altruistic, but rather as a way of deflecting the issue, by giving a noncommittal answer:

"If you think any of my children are taking drugs, I want the police called immediately... But schools don't want the police involved... He said that he had dealt with the situation as well as he could, and there was nothing more he could do about it. I was feeling left aggrieved. (Gp. 6)

Further, some parents reported that a teacher had informed them it was their responsibility to discipline a child, particularly during out of class time, eg in the playground, on the way home (Gp. 2, 4, 7).

- The lack of supervision outside classrooms was an issue for many parents, particularly given the need for effective discipline of pupils, noted above. Thus, playgrounds, buses, and nearby streets were cited as providing many opportunities for pupil disagreement and misbehaviour (Gp. 2-7). Many parents were concerned about the possibility of their children being attacked in these surroundings, either by other children or by adults.
- Class organisation also gave cause for concern to a number of parents with children in primary school, and several parents had apparently attended the groups to seek guidance about this. The seating of children in groups was strongly queried, particularly the way children were allocated to groups—ie what criteria of 'ability' had been used to determine which table the pupils sat at (Gp. 2, 4, 6). These parents were also often worried about labelling effects. Two parents felt that the close physical contact of children grouped in this way led to greater difficulty for teachers in controlling children (Gp. 2, 6):

"(My daughter)... wants to learn, but the other kids at the table are more disruptive and prevent her doing her work because she wants to get on... the teacher doesn't seem to do anything about it." (Gp. 6)

One of these mothers also believed that teaching two primary years in one class, eg P4 and P5 together, curtailed learning ability as teaching energies were divided.

- Some parents felt that extra learning support was insufficiently provided by schools, even where an assessment had been made indicating the need for extra provision (Gp.2, 6). Examples indicated that extra learning support when a child was sick was either not forthcoming (Gp.3), or provided too late (Gp.4). Another related issue concerns medical support, and one parent complained of the lack of attention his son had received when sick at school (Gp.4).
- A few parents felt their child was not being encouraged to develop confidence, or was not being adequately 'pushed' enough, which was felt to lead to under achievement, or a lack of involvement. Similarly, some parents noted that their children had reported teachers would often not explain concepts or answer queries. When approached on an individual basis, parents were informed by their children that they had been told to 'go and sit down', 'you should know that, I've already explained it', etc.

Specific items causing concern were also raised which were not mentioned in more than one parental group. A sample of these are discussed below:

- Religious tuition was a major bone of contention for parents whose religion is not Christianity (Gp. 2). These parents felt that their children were under more stress than others, as some received an extra hour religious tuition per night leaving little free leisure time. It was suggested that schools should cater for different religious beliefs, perhaps by covering the three main religions in RE (Gp. 6) or providing weekly tuition for religious pupils, eg Muslims (Gp. 2).
- School meal provision was criticised in one group by various parents (Gp. 5). The main issue appears to be related to the order children queue in primary schools and the subsequent lack of choice of food available for those at the end of the queue.

- Admission into primary school was also a contentious subject for parents in Gp. 3. This group thought that parents should be allowed to determine, in conjunction with professionals, whether their child was ready to begin school. Thus, it was considered that the school starting age should be flexible.

■ Communication routes between parents and teachers

The most common route parents take when raising a grievance is to meet the headteacher or class teacher (Gp. 2-7). This is usually done by writing a letter or 'phoning the school, usually to make an appointment (Gp. 2-7). One parent preferred a more informal approach, corroborating information given in the headteacher group: 'I just went right in' (Gp. 5). Some parents from the ethnic minority group appeared to be more likely to approach an intermediary, specifically an ethnic minority community group, in the first instance, feeling too daunted to approach the school.

Some parents had also raised concerns at parent evenings to classteachers. The impression gained is that it can be difficult for parents to obtain redress at these events (Gp. 2, 4, 6, 7). Comments indicated that: complaints may go no further than the teacher; no change may be apparent in the situation even though the teacher was accommodating on the evening; and time available was insufficient to discuss grievances adequately.

At secondary level, evidence indicates that parents were usually referred to a guidance teacher by the school secretary when telephoning for an appointment (Gp. 2-7). The main reason given for approaching teaching staff was because it was felt that they could do something to resolve a matter, sometimes because they caused the problem or because they would be aware of the problem.

The ways teachers contact parents appear to be equally varied, and no systematic procedures appeared to be followed between, or within, schools. The point at which parents are informed of incidents appears to be left to the school's discretion, and some parents felt that they were informed too late. Two groups in one Region felt the need to 'nip the problem in the bud' was important, and felt teachers and parents could ideally work together to achieve this (Gp. 4, 5).

The method of sending a letter home with the child appeared problematic in some instances, particularly where a disciplinary matter involving the child was concerned (Gp. 2, 4-7). A few parents reported that sometimes letters sent home with children were not received until weeks later. One parent mentioned that the secondary school her child attended sent correspondence home on a Wednesday, making it easier for parents to know when to expect letters. This approach was preferred by others in the group (Gp. 6). Some parents in the group had occasionally been contacted over the telephone by school staff, usually about incidents felt to require discipline. There were no complaints about this method.

School Boards were not mentioned often by respondents. No-one said they would contact the SB with a problem. Group 7 (parents from prosperous areas) spoke favourably of School Boards, and felt that there were advantages of having them as it was one way of 'networking' with other schools nearby or in the 'cluster', ie a secondary school and associated primaries. Other parents were more unsure of the role of School Boards and one felt they portrayed an unnecessarily formal image, eg having to speak through a Chair.

■ Difficulties in contacting school staff

Some parents in the groups had been unable to reach teaching staff, who may have been assigned by the school to handle grievances (Gp. 2, 3, 4, 5, 7). A number of reasons became evident. Parents reported that they were often busy, and some had jobs, which made visiting the school difficult. For others, teaching timetables could make it difficult to contact teachers quickly. This reiterates comments made to us by headteachers.

Some parents found that if the headteacher could not resolve a problem, they did not know whom to approach to remedy the matter (Gp. 2-5, 7). A particular dilemma arose for one parent for whom the headteacher of the school was also the class teacher considered to be the cause of the grievance. The issue was not resolved when the parent spoke to the headteacher, and the parent was subsequently at 'her wits end' as to how to deal with the situation. Similarly, other parents felt that there was no point in going to a person perceived to cause a grievance as 'it would go no further' and not be resolved (Gp. 2, 4, 5).

■ Problems encountered in raising grievances

Also, in line with comments made in the headteacher group, headteachers or teachers were often seen to be a first port of call for parents, and one parent felt that it was the head's responsibility to 'put his house in order'. Yet, a number of factors appear to affect the ability of teachers to handle, and resolve, grievances. Issues mentioned include the following and are expanded upon in the subsequent section:

- the headteacher did not have first-hand knowledge of the situation which delayed possible resolution (Gp. 2, 4, 5)
- a perceived lack of power of teachers to deal with matters, particularly discipline related (Gp. 2-6)
- many parents felt intimidated when speaking with a teacher (Gp. 2-6)
- the teacher was too busy to take their grievance seriously (Gp. 4-6)
- teachers were felt less likely these days to involve themselves in extra-curricular activities (Gp. 4, 5, 7)
- a perceived tendency of senior teaching staff to take the views of the teacher into account more readily than those of the parent or pupil (Gp. 2-7).

The following examples illustrate some of these factors:

"She fired that idea down... and she said 'do you not realise that teachers have enough to do trying to teach a child'. They thought it was ridiculous to have a diary for children—but both the teacher and the child could write any complaints in it and get them resolved." (Gp. 5)

"She doesn't really listen, I don't think, to the kids. She's the sort of teacher that wants everything to run smoothly." (Gp. 3)

Parent 1: "I did talk to the headteacher about it, but she said 'we don't get paid to supervise, and the teachers are doing quite a lot extra anyway.'"

Parent 2: "Nowadays because of the change in contracts, or perhaps because of the industrial action, I think a lot of the goodwill of teachers is not there any more. Teachers did supervise the playground prior to that." (Gp. 4)

"I went to the teacher but she didn't think there was a problem. I am terrified to approach her again, or speak to another teacher, as I am afraid that my child will suffer from worse treatment... When my daughter goes to the teacher and asks her to explain something, she is told to sit back down and not to bother her... The assistant headteacher is like the teacher—very strict—I think he would side with her." (Gp. 6)

■ Reasons for not raising a grievance

As can be seen above, there appear to be several key reasons why parents may choose not to raise a grievance. These include: the fear of reprisals or 'making waves'; the perceived view of parents by educational professionals, and vice versa; and the lack of adequate resolution when a grievance had been raised previously.

Some parents in the group believed that raising a grievance to the school may make the situation worse for their child, due to possible reprisals from staff or pupils (Gp. 2–6). For example:

"I worried that because the headteacher had spoken to the teacher, that the teacher may pick on her, but there hasn't been any of that, because I asked her how she gets on with the teacher and she says there are no problems now." (Gp. 3)

"Every time you go to the school, all the kids nudge each other. They know you are there to complain and they tease your child about it." (Gp. 5)

This supports the finding from a study by one school that the majority of their parents felt that raising a grievance against a teacher would affect how their child was treated in school (SPTC, 1994). Frequently in such cases, parents claimed that the child concerned would beg them *not* to approach the school, and this appeared to be one reason why parents chose not to raise a grievance (Gp. 2–6).

Evidence was given to suggest that teachers were sometimes perceived to adopt a stern or insensitive response to children, and sometimes their parents (Gp. 2–7):

"I couldn't discuss it with (the teacher), she is very harsh and my daughter needs the softly, softly, approach. When the headteacher isn't receptive to what you say it is difficult to get problems resolved." (Gp. 3)

"Sometimes the way teachers look at you, or answer you, when you are trying to tell them something... they're right and you're wrong and that's it." (Gp. 5)

This attitude was especially apparent towards extra learning support or health care, as noted previously. Some parents felt they did not hold an equal position with staff—the differential in professional negotiation skills, qualifications and/or language use seemed key factors here (Gp. 2, 4–6). Others felt teachers could be defensive (Gp. 3, 4, 6, 7). The following discussion excerpt illustrates these perceptions:

Parent 1: "We're *equals*... they talk down to you as well, when you go to parents' nights they're sitting behind desks. They *tell* you about your child."

Parent 2: "Certainly the majority of teachers I've spoken to are scared of parents. It's not that they don't think we're equals, it's that they feel unsure of

their ground, because they have never had training on how to approach parents, how to be with adults. Their whole ethos... the majority went from school to college or university and back to school, so they have never actually dealt with adults, and they are scared of adults because they don't know what you want... they are apprehensive as they don't know what parents are there for...you are an unknown entity." (Gp. 4)

Another parent provided one example of how parents may feel as though they are not treated like adults:

"She's the sort of teacher that makes you feel as though you are still at school." (Gp. 3).

This also illustrates the impact memories can have on parent-teacher relations, and most parents felt that the impressions of teachers gained whilst pupils, remained with them (Gp. 2-7). One parent noted that negative memories could have had a more profound effect upon current relations. (Gp. 4)

One consideration which may prevent parents approaching the school relates to the view parents may have of the responsibilities of educational professionals. Thus, participants suggested that some parents may feel it is the role of the school to educate and discipline their children during school hours (although none of the parents in this study professed to adhere to this attitude) and therefore any action by teachers was validated.

A number of parents felt that they would be labelled as 'pushy' or 'strong willed and therefore avoided' (Gp. 2-6) if they went to the school too often with grievances. Other parents disagreed, stating that their schools welcomed grievances being brought to the school, and did not feel that such labels would be applied to them by staff. Another participant (a school board member) felt that parents were viewed as an 'occupational hazard' by school staff.

Evidence suggested that some teachers and schools were considered to be 'unwelcoming' by parents:

"You feel your school is just a building... an institution... if the school would try to organise social activities for parents and teachers to mix, then it wouldn't be an alien place for you to go to... you could go into the school and discuss the problem before it becomes a complaint." (Gp. 5)

This supports the findings of a survey of 3,351 parents' views of schools in Scotland. This survey found that primary parents and secondary parents were equally likely to mention 'unwelcoming teachers' as a negative feature of the school (12% and 13% respectively) (MacBeath *et al*, 1989, p.10). Baxter (1994) suggests that one factor impeding full 'customer' involvement may be a resistance of staff who fear the loss of status or power. Perhaps, if teachers are unsure how to react to parental grievances, or perceive their own position to be threatened by grievances, their reaction may be construed by parents as 'unwelcoming'.

Unfortunately, where participants felt that a previous grievance had not been satisfactorily remedied, some seemed less inclined to approach the school again when a similar concern arose (Gp. 2, 4-7). Occasionally, parents then took matters into their own hands. Examples of bullying being dealt with in this way were given. One pupil was moved to another school by her parents, others contacted bullies, or their parents, themselves. This seemed to be a particular

feature in the ethnic minority group discussion, and one mother spoke to the 'bullies' herself after feeling that teaching staff had not taken effective action. Indeed it seems as though ethnic minority parents were less likely to take a concern to the school. This supports research findings elsewhere, that ethnic minority groups are less likely to have contact with the school than other groups (Scottish Development Department, 1991). Possible reasons may be:

"Parents from an ethnic background may be daunted by speaking to a white person... We have to fight for what other parents get naturally. Nothing appears to be ours by right. Religious education would be the obvious example." (Gp. 2)

The reasons given here highlight some of the main reasons why people may not complain about educational provision at the school level. Thus, parents may worry that their child's situation may worsen if they raise a grievance, or perceive that their child's situation may not improve as a result of the parents' going to the school. Some parents felt that staff might not take their grievance seriously, or be too busy to deal with it adequately. Other reasons given were that staff might adopt a defensive attitude or were more articulate and persuasive than parents.

Taking grievances to the local authority was rare, and only three parents in the groups had contacted the education department. Only one had raised a grievance, and she felt that it had been handled well. The parent was told to whom she was speaking, what action would be taken, and the call was sympathetically received by education authority staff (Gp. 5). Generally however, local authorities were seen as too remote and too bureaucratic to contact in the first instance—factors seen to cause unnecessary delays. Parents in Group 7 were more likely to perceive the potential benefits of reporting grievances to education departments when school mechanisms fail to provide a satisfactory outcome.

A few parents felt that education departments would 'close ranks' and protect the interests of the education service, over those of the parent. Interestingly, this is the opposite of what headteachers believed—that education authorities considered parents' rights to be more important than teachers'.

■ Evidence of good practice

The concerns noted throughout this chapter should not obscure the fact that many grievances appear to be successfully handled, with a satisfactory outcome for parents. The impression given is that certain schools are better at handling grievances than others. Some schools can be thought of as an 'open house', and try to create a 'welcoming' atmosphere:

"They provide lots of ways to go to the school. You can go at any time, including after school. Teachers will always have time for you. There are regular meetings you can attend with the classroom teacher. There are also 'parent rooms'. I don't have any problems with my child's education, but if I did I wouldn't hesitate to approach the school." (Gp. 6)

One parent had deliberately sent her child to a primary school (via a placing request to her education department) she knew had a policy of encouraging parents to bring any grievances to the attention of the school, as shown below:

"It's such a nice school. They actually said at the very beginning, 'anytime you want to know what the kids are doing, anytime, you don't have to make an

appointment'. I've gone in, in the middle of the class, and seen what is going on. They're very, very welcoming, but that's why I put him in there... You feel it when you walk in, that it's a nice place. I've been doing stuff with the kids myself and they are very enthusiastic of any input from the parents." (Gp. 4)

Often parents commended staff for fostering a sympathetic and approachable attitude towards parents (Gp. 3, 4, 6, 7), although many schools do appear to prefer some notice that a parent is to visit. Comments suggested that many parental concerns are successfully remedied. Generally, these parents could explain how an issue was resolved, indicating that feedback had been given on action taken and the resultant outcome:

"He was being bullied and I told the teacher. I think, partly because other parents had complained about this child, I was taken seriously, and the bully was excluded from the school." (Gp. 7)

"My daughter was missing the bus as she was being bullied. I went and saw the guidance teacher and this resulted in the discipline of the two girls and they gave my daughter a pass to allow her to leave school early to get on the bus quickly. They did that for a week, and would have continued it if necessary. It resolved the situation straight away. I was very happy with the results." (Gp. 3)

One factor which may have contributed to fast resolution of difficulties relates to the ability of teachers in small schools (and therefore, primary schools) to know individual children, and their parents, better than large schools. It was felt that if teachers did not know children well, misunderstandings were more likely to occur.

Benefits appeared to accrue to parents who had been involved in the school. They felt they had gained a better understanding of staff and school life. Some parents reported that it was difficult for them to visit the school during the day, and did not want this to reflect a lack of interest:

"If they know your face they are more likely to be friendly towards you." (Gp. 6, 7)

"I am too busy to be involved much in the school... some parents are given the impression that if they are not involved, then they are not bothered what happens to their children." (Gp. 2)

■ Ways of improving the handling of grievances

Numerous suggestions were offered by parents as to how procedures for grievance and redress strategies could be improved. Particular facets of grievance-handling could be further developed in schools. Thus, comments suggest that staff who deal with grievances should adopt an attitude which:

- takes an objective view of the situation
- aims to resolve the grievance as soon as possible
- provides encouragement to come forward with a complaint
- allows sufficient time for parents to express a grievance
- is supportive, empathetic and helpful
- is understanding of parental and teacher constraints
- gives feedback on progress or action taken.

In facilitating such developments, several groups mentioned the need for an independent representative whose responsibilities include liaising with both teachers and parents when a concern—either teacher or parent initiated—is raised (Gp. 2, 4, 5). The only person with a child in a fee-paying school, said that parents had been informed to contact a member of a parent liaison group with any problems. This consisted of two parent representatives per year group (Gp. 7). No other parents mentioned the existence of such a person in their school.

The concept of a 'parent-teacher liaison officer' was discussed in Group 4. The essential characteristics of this role could be more widely applied to any person who deals with grievances. This group decided that one such person could operate in each 'cluster' of schools. They would represent both teachers and parents, but would ideally give more support to parents, given the lack of existing provision for parental representation in grievance raising.

The person could advocate for parents, and act as an independent adviser between the teacher and parent, if required. They could help devise strategies for resolving grievances. This may include, if necessary, a meeting between the headteacher, any teachers or pupils involved, as well as the parent(s) and their child. It was considered vital that this person was not only approachable, but also available. Parents did not want to have to spend time trying to track down a suitable person to speak to.

Whilst effective procedures in grievance and redress are hampered by factors such as the minority who chose to ignore established procedures or those who chose not to approach the school at all, the majority of parents who had raised a grievance in this study did appear to use the correct channels for raising grievances (ie writing to or telephoning the school for an appointment). This suggests that procedures can be worthwhile, although consideration must be given to the way they are presented given that many people do not like to perceive themselves as 'complainers'.

Several groups noted that if procedures are implemented, they should be standardised between schools and regions (Gp. 2, 4, 5). Parents should be informed—early on—of the correct channels for obtaining redress. The need for sufficient publicising of any procedures was also mentioned in Group 4. It was suggested that leaflets or letters sent home, rather than posters in the school, would be the most effective method. This way, all parents would be informed, instead of just those who visit the school.

Other ways of improving grievance procedures were noted:

- better home-school links were advocated, particularly by contacting parents early if teachers are aware of problems and by encouraging joint work between parents and teacher to solve any difficulties
- teacher training might be given on how to deal with parental concerns
- encouraging teachers and parents to view discipline as a joint venture, particularly by informing parents early on if a problem is spotted
- allowing teachers greater powers in disciplining children. Different examples criticising current methods were offered by parents. One parent felt, for instance, that punishment exercises could be done without the

parent finding out about it, whereas the 'old fashioned' detention after school made it more difficult for the pupil to hide the fact that they were in trouble.

■ Discussion

A significant number of issues arose from talking to parents about how their concerns or grievances are dealt with by educationalists. The nature of this study means that these issues cannot be investigated in depth, but do highlight the wide variety of experiences which exist.

Discipline methods adopted by schools received significant comment. So did communication between the school and parents, particularly where teachers identified a problem and did not inform parents immediately. Another major factor which affected communication between the groups, was the fact that some parents were afraid their children would suffer reprisals from teachers or other pupils as a result of raising a grievance. Anecdotal evidence suggested that such fears could be substantiated, even if personal experience did not indicate this outcome. Other factors suggest that if previous experience of raising a grievance had been unsatisfactory, respondents were less likely in future to approach the school with a similar grievance.

The need for an independent advice worker, who could liaise between teachers and parents, was identified by these groups. Personal qualities appreciated by parents for this post would include: empathy, informality, knowledge of the 'system', as well as offering support and possibilities for resolution of difficulties. Additionally, clear and well publicised procedures, standardised between different schools, were advocated. Such procedures should aim to provide a speedy resolution, to offer protection for parents and children—possibly by retaining anonymity, and to create better links between parents and teachers.

5 Summary and conclusions

This report has so far outlined the main issues which arise for parents, headteachers and pupils in relation to grievances regarding school education. This chapter pulls these views together, identifying key themes and implications which affect grievance handling, particularly at the school level.

■ The nature of school-based concerns

The headteachers informed us that the range of grievances received from parents about the education of their children was wide. This was subsequently confirmed by talking with parents and pupils. Discipline-related grievances, such as bullying, caused a great deal of worry for some parents and the lack of supervision outside the classroom was a concern.

Within the classroom at primary level, the ability of the teacher to discipline children was felt to be influenced by the organisation of seating arrangements and grouping children into tables based on 'ability'. There also appears to be a need for greater communication to parents on how pupil assessments are made.

No parents felt that there was a problem with the curriculum, and this supports headteachers' comments. The pupil group did however make several comments relating to the curriculum, for example, the repeating of work between P7 and S1.

Parents and pupils raised grievances about individual teachers. These relate to ways teachers treat pupils and their parents. Some parents commented that they felt the teacher did not take their concern seriously. Some parents felt that the teacher was not doing enough to 'push' their child, especially if parents felt their child was timid or lacked confidence, although other parents felt this was understandable given current class sizes. There was a general feeling that some teachers were too strict with children (particularly in primary school) and these teachers expected a level of maturity from children which was not forthcoming.

■ Contacting the school

The parents generally contacted the school by phoning, usually to make an appointment, in the first instance. A smaller number chose to write to the school. The pupils tended to approach staff personally with their concerns, or if they felt they could not, might inform their parents. Headteachers emphasised the minority of parents who might also contact a teacher personally without prior warning, although this method was only mentioned by one parent in our groups.

In primary school, the main person a parent would contact initially was the headteacher or classroom teacher. At secondary level, guidance staff appear to be the main people dealing with parental and pupil grievances. The classroom teacher might also be consulted—usually through parents' evenings. Parents' evenings were considered an inadequate forum for raising grievances. The

School Board and education authority were also perceived as unsatisfactory channels for raising grievances by many participants: they were seen as too remote and divorced from the situation requiring redress.

On a number of occasions, evidence showed that the school could become aware of a problem, usually discipline-related, before the parent. Schools were likely to inform parents (sometimes after significant delay) by sending a letter home with the pupil or, occasionally, by phoning the parent (more often the case in primary schools). Letters sent via pupils were frequently felt to be an unsuitable vehicle for conveying messages. Telephone calls were the preferred source of communication for parents.

■ Perceptions of 'complaining'

It can be difficult to talk to parents and pupils about their 'complaining behaviour' as many do not feel that they have made a complaint. Upon examination, however, many parents and some pupils have in fact approached the school with a concern or query. This intangible factor means that any 'complaint procedures' for education may be something of a misnomer as parents may feel these channels do not apply to them.

Additionally, many people do not like to think of themselves as 'complainers' (NCC, 1993). This study reveals that there is a prevailing belief amongst this sample of parents that schools view people who raise grievances negatively, and view those who help and contribute, positively. The impression gained is that many parents have a high degree of tolerance, and have accepted several 'misunderstandings', either against themselves or their children, by school staff:

"She has this little smirk when she is being told off... it is her nerves. He told her she was a spoilt brat and that she may be able to get away with that sort of behaviour at home but not at school... I can understand why he says this as anyone who didn't know her may think the same." (Gp. 3)

This tolerance might relate to the perceived inability of children to convey events accurately, and parents and headteachers were conscious of the fact that pupils can exaggerate problems. Sometimes parents would weigh up the evidence, and if more than one child said the same thing, they were more inclined to believe the child. Pupils seem least likely to be taken seriously when making a complaint. They themselves recognised that the school would be more likely to listen to them if they persuaded their parents to take up their case.

■ Current procedures for grievance and redress in schools

There appears to be a lack of regional guidance to schools on grievance handling. This is reflected in the variety of practices which currently exist at school level when dealing with a grievance. The evidence here suggests that differences occur between primary and secondary, and between schools within these sectors. For example, primary headteachers appear more likely than those in secondary schools to become involved in grievance handling, although their ability to do so effectively may be curtailed by the constraints on their time and knowledge. Some schools or teachers appear to be better at promoting a welcoming, open aura than others. Those schools or teachers which parents might consider to be less effective at achieving this atmosphere appear to be characterised by a wariness of parental contact.

■ Reasons for parents and pupils not raising a grievance

Interestingly, the headteacher group—whilst briefly mentioning that parents sometimes air grievances about teachers—chose to emphasise the problems facing teachers when dealing with parents. This might partially reflect the view some parents have that schools 'close ranks' if there is a problem. It is believed that any good grievance procedures should allow for people to 'drop in' to discuss matters (*NCC Journal*, October 1993) but this may be impractical for schools and 'dropping in' seemed to be actively discouraged by many schools, possibly for reasons of inconvenience and security.

The way a grievance was handled was problematic for some parents. The fear of reprisals for their child meant that parents might be reluctant to raise particular grievances with the school. Some measure of confidentiality and assurance appeared to be preferred by parents to alleviate the worry that their child could end up in a worse situation than before. Often, potential reprisals from classteachers, as well as other pupils, were anticipated although evidence suggests that this was perhaps more perceived than real.

Some parents and pupils felt that they were not informed what action had been taken to resolve their grievance and sometimes this led to a belief that 'nothing was being done'. Headteachers also expressed concern that local authorities did not inform them of what action had been taken where they had been approached by parents to resolve a grievance. This indicates the need for feedback on what action has been taken, and what progress or change has occurred as a result.

Teachers' ability to communicate well left some parents and pupils feeling at a disadvantage. It was suggested that teachers were more able to be persuasive and articulate than parents or pupils, and sometimes the parent or pupil was left feeling that they hadn't been 'heard', or that no strategies of resolution had been considered:

"I left feeling that she had totally twisted the conversation round and realised afterwards, in actual fact I was no further forward than I had been before."

(Gp. 6)

Sometimes, if parents perceived that no action had been taken to deal with their grievance, they would take matters into their own hands, particularly for matters considered to require a prompt response. Other parents were simply left feeling worried or at their 'wits end', not knowing who they could contact next to obtain resolution. Incentive to raise grievances appears to decrease where the grievance was not taken seriously the first time or where no perceived action was taken to provide resolution.

■ Successful outcomes

Commonly, grievances were more likely to be resolved than not. In several parental groups and the pupil group, the prevailing view was one of satisfaction with their schools. Here, existing mechanisms were generally considered adequate. Many views expressed in this study suggest that practices recommended for 'ideal schools' in the recent MVA survey for the Scottish Office Education Department are being adopted by staff (MacBeath *et al*, 1989). In relation to the issues raised in this study, these include:

- encouraging good parent—teacher relationships
- providing access to the community
- a 'welcoming atmosphere'.

Overall, participants in our study felt that, ideally, staff should be objective but empathetic in their dealings with parents and offer a speedy response. Also parents should be informed early on of procedures and encouraged to use them. Channels for raising grievances appeared to be well-known and varied. 'Parent rooms', regular meetings with the teacher, set times after school hours for parents to visit, invitations to visit at any time, were offered as examples of ways schools tried to promote a positive relationship with parents. Feedback also tended to be offered on any action taken to resolve grievances.

The practice of some schools to encourage parents to become involved in the work of the school, eg in the dining hall or classroom, had advantages in terms of increasing knowledge of how teachers operate. This appeared in most cases to diminish the likelihood of misunderstandings between parents, pupils and teachers. However, in at least one case this had resulted in a parent voicing criticisms of a particular teacher's approach.

When schools seek to increase parental involvement, it is important that they are flexible in the ways in which involvement is encouraged, for instance, some parents said that they would like to be involved but were not able to make a regular or long-term input.

■ Conclusions

Whilst the existing mechanisms for raising grievances and obtaining redress appeared to be operating satisfactorily, most of the time, for most parents, in terms of this small sample our evidence suggests that there is still considerable room for improvement. The impression given by parents is one of a variety of reactions by school staff to grievance and its redress. Particularly sensitive issues appear difficult for schools to resolve, bullying and complaints against individual teachers being evident examples. Future developments in grievance procedures might be sensibly advised to investigate ways in which such grievances can be resolved.

In addition, it would appear that relationships between some parents/ pupils and teachers can still be difficult. Where there is a large difference in educational attainment or professional expertise, misunderstandings or frustration are more likely to occur. Lack of personal knowledge of pupils was also considered a disadvantage, and could contribute to difficulties. Some parents were concerned that there was a lack of representation of parents when a grievance was made and therefore some type of educational ombudsman would be welcomed by many parents.

Where parents were more assertive or confident, and worked with teachers to devise a solution, redress appears more likely. From parental comments, it appeared that a lack of action by the school was likely to be a result of uncertainty as to how to proceed, although denial of the problem was also given as a reason for lack of action. Thus, in many cases where parents were able to offer

constructive suggestions to teachers, these were taken seriously, discussed between teacher and parents, and a positive outcome produced.

However, these confident parents differed in their approach to the 'assertive complainers' mentioned previously. 'Assertive complainers' may be more likely to ascribe lack of action to denial rather than to uncertainty as to what to do, although we have no evidence here. Guidance is therefore not only required for parents when raising grievance but also for teachers, both in terms of involving parents and by enabling an appropriate form of resolution and redress to be provided.

Whilst a great deal of good practice can be found in education when providing procedures for raising grievances, the level of concern expressed by a number of parents in this study suggests that, ultimately, mechanisms for redress could be unsuccessful if certain attitudes are not changed. The term 'complaint', for example, can evoke strong negative reactions and policy makers must be aware of the consequences of this when devising strategies for grievance procedures. Where schools adhere to formal procedures, eg by publicising them widely or providing parents rooms, these will not be effective if parents choose to ignore them.

Greater mutual understanding and involvement between parents and teachers may help change attitudes and alleviate some grievances. Current home-school initiatives could be of benefit here. As one advocate of formalised home-school partnership schemes states:

'There is now sufficient research to indicate that productive parental involvement is one of the prerequisites for an effective school, and that co-operation between home and school can raise standards overall'. (Tomlinson, 1991, p.4)

Child centred home-school initiatives ie those that involve the teacher and parent working together for the benefit of the individual child would appear to have great potential for minimising difficulties and misunderstandings between parents and teachers. Each would gain greater understanding of the roles and limitations of the other. This would enable a more consistent approach to developing the abilities of the child in home and school contexts, and so benefit the child as well as parents and teachers. It is important that our schools are 'user friendly', and that includes parents as well as pupils. Although the rhetoric is clear, the reality is less so, and it would be wise for providers of education to consider the practical implications of parents as 'users' in greater detail than might appear to be the case at present.

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Annex 1: Key characteristics of parental group members

Group 2

Total in Group: 5

Five parents of ethnic minority background in Dundee. One male and four females attended. The average number of children per family was greater in this group - two members had five children each. All were 'non active' * parents.

Group 3

Total in Group: 2

Two female parents from rural areas in Arbroath. Both had helped in classroom activities on occasion. Both were generally satisfied with the education their children received.

Group 4

Total in Group: 7

Parents came from different divisions in Strathclyde. Parents were predominantly active, 4 were members of school boards, and two of these were also on a PTA. Another parent had chosen her child's school via a placing request. Three male parents attended.

Group 5

Total in Group: 5

All parents in this group were from an Area of Priority Treatment in Glasgow. Only one was an 'active' parent, a school board member. All were females.

Group 6

Total in Group: 7

All parents in this group were from one traditional working class area of Edinburgh. All were 'non-active'. Four had never approached the school outwith parents evenings and were generally satisfied with the education their children received. All were females.

Group 7

Total in Group: 5

All parents in this group were from affluent areas of Edinburgh. All were, or had been, professional employees—two were teachers. One child attended an independent primary school. None were 'active' parents. All were females.

In each parental group both the primary and secondary sector were represented, ie parents had children in either primary school, secondary school or both. All children attended state comprehensive school unless otherwise stated.

* The definition of 'active' is some form of regular formal involvement with the school (not including parents' evenings). Thus, a 'non-active parent' would not be a member of the PTA, School Board or help out in the classroom regularly.

Annex 2: Discussion schedules

HEADTEACHERS

1. What range of grievances are raised by parents?
2. What is the frequency of grievance raising?
3. What channels are used by parents to raise grievances?
informal, formal
4. How do headteachers deal with grievances from parents?
workload, redress strategies, effect on home-school relations
5. How should educational grievances be handled?
who should parents approach, what support is required, roles of others
6. What issues exist in terms of accountability to external bodies?
7. General issues
what makes complaints handling difficult/ what could make it easier?

PUPILS/ PARENTS

1. What sort of things have caused you dissatisfaction about your/your child's education?
2. Who would you raise any grievances with?
3. Why would you go to them?
4. What is the easiest/most difficult way for you to contact them?
5. Would you prefer someone to help you raise a grievance?
If so, how would they help?
6. What would please you about the way your grievance was handled?
7. Why would you decide not to raise a grievance?
8. What is the response likely to be if you did raise a grievance?
9. What do schools think about parents/pupils raising grievances?
10. How could the school/ Education Authority make it easier for you to raise a grievance?

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